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AUTHOR Krolikowski, Sue
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ABSTRACT

Reading aloud to kindergarten children makes good educational sense. For this group, teachers should emphasize the aspects of reading aloud that promote a love of story listening as a bridge to future reading. To read aloud well, teachers should: (1) use stories with strong plots, vivid characters, and interesting settings; (2) select a book they really like; (3) prepare the material carefully; (4) allow few interruptions; (5) relax and communicate; and (6) keep the material and the listener in mind while consciously attempting to bring the two together. (RS)

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"Building Bridges to Reading"
a paper presented as part of a panel
USING TRADE BOOKS IN THE CLASSROOMS: NCTE/CBC WINNERS

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Sue Krolikowski
Detroit Public Schools
Detroit, Michigan

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I'd been reading aloud to children at virtually every every reasonable opportunity for years because it made substitute teaching seem natural rather than forced. In time, I built up reading lists for various grades and a small library. I found that a good book choice would often break the tension of an otherwise stressful day. Now I am beginning to understand why this was so.

Briefly stated, I teach kindergarten in Detroit. The experience that I wrote about occurred during my first year in kindergarten, now four years ago.

This group behaved in the one way that was most surprising -- they were apathetic. I can still picture their slumped shoulders of resignation. I read every day, but our discussions were vague or virtually non-existent. I allowed the children to examine the books that I read, and I tried stories on filmstrips. Nothing seemed to help. Then, we turned a corner after Christmas when I started a little snowman unit. As part of that effort, I read "The Summer Snowman" by Gene Zion.

This is the story of a gently little boy named Henry who made a small snowman at the end of the winter. With his mother's help, he hid the snowman in the freezer until July 4. Henry greatly enjoyed sharing a secret with his mother and, at the same time, befuddling his older brother. When Independence Day came, Henry was something of a hero with his unique attraction. Even the mayor shook his hand. Just as the television cameras were ready and it seemed that Henry was going to be famous, the snowman melted. He was disappointed for a while, but he

rallied in time to enjoy the fireworks.

As usual, the story seemed to make little impression. I returned the book to the library without giving it a second thought. About a week later, a little girl from the class asked to hear the story again. At first, I wasn't even sure which story she was referring to. I checked out the book, and read it a second time. The children appeared thoughtful, but they were still quiet. I didn't return the book so quickly this time. About four days later, they began to ask again.

It slowly occurred to me that a worth-while learning experience was evolving. Henry was real to them -- an apparent first for a character in print. However, I did not understand their comprehension of the story's ending. After all, Henry had been disappointed. During the course of the story, Henry had had a rather wide variety of experiences. Finally, after I had read "The Summer Snowman" about four times, I asked the children what they liked about Henry. One child answered that Henry was smart. When I then asked what they thought about the story's ending, one child who had become an astute observer noted, "Nobody is smart all the time." We had turned a corner. A book was no longer just an item for a teacher to use. It could be truly shared.

We're familiar with requests to read aloud to children, but let us consider why it makes good educational sense. To begin, I would note that the IRA Position Paper published in 1986 states that instruction of forms of reading and writing should be deferred until

children have a good grasp of the functions of reading and writing.[1]

Dr. John McCaugney of Wayne State University in Detroit has devised a list of possible explanations as to why "exposure" promotes growth in measurable reading skill development. I would add that I have emphasized those aspects that promote a love of reading or, in the case of kindergarten, a love of story listening as a bridge to future reading.

Concept Development

1. Naming known things and experiences.
2. Putting feelings into words.
3. Introduction to new things and experiences.

Language Development

1. Hearing vocabulary
2. Hearing rhyme
3. Hearing language used playfully
4. Hearing language used appropriately, but differently

Willing Reader/Listener Skills

1. Ability to identify with characters.
2. Ability to focus outside self.
3. Ability to make and withold judgements.
4. Ability to predict which books will gratify.

*All of these are developed only with direct experience with books.

The IRA Position Paper cited earlier concluded that the following general types of experiences help a young child learn about reading and writing:

(a) interaction with adults in speaking, listening, reading and writing. This would include reading books aloud to children at least once and preferably two or more times.

(b) adult modeling of language and literacy. This would include the pleasure and satisfaction found in such experiences.[2]

In addition, I would ask your consideration of another aspect, and that is how books and play could work together for young children. Piaget has stated that play fixes new abilities both physical and mental and prevents them from being lost. Therefore, if play were to be prevented somehow, many fewer concepts would be available to the child.[3]

Some years ago, Sara Smilansky conducted a study that took the position that children with an inadequate play background are much less able to concentrate or to develop a theme.[4] In addition, direct teaching had marked, positive effects upon such abilities as make believe in regard to action and situation, role play and verbal communication.[5]

While the use of field trips was emphasized, Smilansky also stated that story and concept books were used. A shared experience gave the teacher a frame of reference to guide the play. I would suggest that some stories become so familiar to children that they can re-appear in some form in their play.

Please consider. A recent study by Tshantiz based upon 95 four and five year old children concluded that many had serious difficulties engaging in co-operative, socio-dramatic play. Based

upon positive and negative nomination and a play rating scale, 38% of the children were rejected, 7% were neglected; only 26% were average, and 29% were popular. The rejected group had significantly lower play scores and group dramatic scores. They engaged in considerably less dramatic play.[6]

In short, wise enthusiastic use of books should be tried as a method to provide a basis for play for these vulnerable children. Learning to pretend and staying in role are important keys to further learning as we have seen in the Smilansky study. Apparently, a need is there to be met.

How, then, does one read aloud well? The following is summarized from a hand-out developed by Dr. Donald J. Bissett from Wayne State University in Detroit. He in turn re-printed it from the Teacher's Guide to the Readiness Program, The Chandler Readers, Noble & Noble Publishers.[7]

1. Use the finest materials available. Stories should have strong plots, vivid characters, and interesting settings.
2. Appeal to the reader (you!) Pick something that you like.
3. Prepare your material carefully. Read aloud in advance.
4. Beyond the youngest children, allow few interruptions.
5. Relax and communicate.
6. Keep the material and the listeners in mind and consciously attempt to bring the two together.

Perhaps of the above, the first and last points are the most

important. We are striving to bring good material to active listeners. Such children are growing in their ability to identify what is known while stretching out to new experiences.

Rosenblatt put it well recently when she said that, "Reading aesthetically with the heart as well as with the head will fuse the cognitive and affective elements of consciousness into a personally lived through reading experience."[8]

Assuming that we are reading aloud daily, this is perhaps an unrealistic hope for each book. However, we need to do this enough of the time so that students truly believe that such experiences are to expected from books.

Footnotes

[1] "IRA Position Statement on Reading and Writing in Early Childhood." The Reading Teacher. (April, 1986), p.823.

[2] Ibid.

[3] J. Bernard Gilmore, "Play: A Special Behavior." Child's Play, p. 319.

[4] Sara Smilansky, The Effects of Sociodramatic Play on Disadvantaged Preschool Children (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1968) p. 3.

[5] Ibid, p. 136.

[6] Linda LeBlanc Tschantz, Preschool Play Behaviors and Sociometric Status (Bethesda MD: ERIC Reproduction Document Service, ED 260 842, 1985) p. 6.

[7] Donald J. Bissett, "Hints for Reading Aloud." Reprinted with permission from Teacher's Guide to the Readiness Program, The Chandler Readers, (Noble & Noble Publishers, Inc. 1965, 1970).

[8] Marilyn Wilson, "Critical Thinking: Repackaging or Revolution?" Language Arts. (October, 1988), p. 548.